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SPECIAL ESTIMATE

POSSIBLE PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS
TO A
US AIR OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE USSR

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S P E C I A L E S T I M A T E

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Published 4 October 1951

The intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Joint Staff participated in the preparation of this estimate. All members of the Intelligence Advisory Committee concurred in this estimate on 27 September.

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POSSIBLE PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO A US AIR OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE USSR

THE PROBLEM

To assess the psychological reactions of the Soviet people (as distinguished from the Communist officialdom) to a US strategic air offensive, using both atomic and conventional weapons.

- ESTIMATE

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF STRATEGIC BOMBING IN WORLD WAR II

1. There is but little evidence on the Soviet reaction to German bombing during World War II, and consequently not much basis for judging the probable psychological effects of heavy US strategic air attacks, including attacks with atomic weapons. Since the Soviet people are Slavs, it may be that their reaction would be different from that of the British, Germans or Japanese, who were subjected to the heaviest strategic air attacks during the recent conflict. However, certain lessons might be drawn from German and Japanese experience, in particular since the totalitarian social and political structure of these two countries was broadly comparable to that of the Soviet Union. While strategic bombing was secondary to front line defeats in depressing Axis civilian morale, it had a serious adverse effect. It was the principal means of affecting directly the morale of the non-military population. Bombing had a less adverse effect on Nazi party members, the bureaucracy and others closely identified with the regime than it did on the remainder of the population.

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2. The initial reaction of all groups to Allied bombing was some heightened antagonism toward the attackers, but neither in Germany nor Japan did it in the longer run apparently increase hatred of the Allies. Moreover, there is no evidence that Allied bombing caused the population to rally closer around the regime. Instead any popular emotions tended to focus on increased resentment toward the regime for failing to protect the population adequately against bombing. However, in the UK, a non-totalitarian country which was not exposed to air bombardment on the same scale as Germany and Japan, the effect of German bombing was apparently to increase British antagonism toward the attacker and to contribute to greater will to fight.

3. German and Japanese propaganda efforts to counteract the psychological impact of Allied bombing, particularly early German attempts to minimize the damage, were largely unsuccessful, and only increased popular resentment toward the regime. Finally, under continued heavy bombing the population tended to become dejected and apathetic, and their emotional reactions to become dulled.

4. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki evidently produced sheer fear and terror among the local populations, together with awe at the power of the US bomb. However, their effect on overall Japanese morale was limited because other factors had already severely depressed Japanese morale and dulled popular reactions and because news of the bombing had not had time to exert its effect before the Japanese surrender.

5. German bombing of the USSR in World War II was on a limited scale. Since evidence on this bombing is meager, it affords no adequate basis for assessing the probable Soviet reaction to heavy atomic attacks. However, it apparently did not especially affect popular feeling toward the Germans. As a rule when military objectives were attacked, the Soviet people tended to accept this as an inevitable part of war, although there appears to have been some resentment against the government for failure to meet the situation adequately.

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PROBABLE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC BOMBING ON SOVIET POPULAR MORALE

6. The most significant psychological effect on the Soviet people of a US air offensive would be its over-all impact on popular morale. It is extremely difficult to separate the probable impact of bombing on morale from that of other important influences which would operate on Soviet popular attitudes and behavior. Moreover, the morale effects of a US air offensive would depend upon a multitude of complex and closely interrelated factors. Among these factors would be: (a) the psychological preparation of the Soviet people, particularly for atomic attacks; (b) the general state of popular morale at the time of these attacks; (c) the severity and extensiveness of the US air offensive and the target systems attacked; (d) counterbalancing Soviet military successes; (e) the effect of bombing on popular attitudes toward the US and the Kremlin; and (f) the success of Soviet propaganda in conditioning the popular reaction.
7. While the Soviet people are generally aware of atomic warfare and of the likelihood they would be bombed in wartime, Soviet propaganda has carefully concealed the potential effects of a US air offensive and continually underplayed the effectiveness of the atomic bomb. Moreover, while some civil defense measures are apparently underway, there are few indications of civil defense preparations against atomic weapons, which would serve to increase public awareness of the results of their use in air attacks. Because of these factors plus the limited Soviet civilian experience of wartime bombing and lack of experience of atomic bombing, the Soviet public is probably psychologically unprepared for intensive atomic attacks.
8. The psychological impact of strategic air attacks would also largely depend on the existing general level of popular morale. In general we believe that the stresses and divisive factors in the Soviet social fabric and the lack of popular identification with the regime, all of which contribute to a relatively low morale among large segments of the population, also create a favorable psychological climate for a further decline in morale under heavy air attacks. However, a

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distinction must be made between the civilian population as a whole and those who are closely identified with the regime -- the party members, the bureaucracy, the police, and probably most Soviet military officers -- whose present morale is markedly higher.

9. Therefore, we believe that heavy widespread US air attacks, largely with mass destruction weapons, would undoubtedly have a sharply depressant effect on Soviet civilian morale, although we cannot assess how much this might be offset by other positive factors. The shock effect of mass destruction weapons would be particularly marked. Heavy atomic bombing would be likely to produce shock, fear, disorder and panic in target areas, and milder but substantial indirect effects in non-target areas, largely depending on the transmission of news and rumor and the degree of personal involvement (relatives bombed, etc.).

10. The impact on the morale of different socio-economic groups would probably vary according to their experience of bombing, their peacetime morale and their attitude toward the regime. The sheer size of the USSR would probably lead to a dilution of any indirect morale effects in regions remote from the bombed areas. Party members, the bureaucracy, and others closely identified with the regime would probably maintain higher morale and show continued determination to resist the attacker. On the other hand, the apathy of the unskilled workers and peasants would probably grow more acute under widespread heavy bombing. The morale of urban dwellers would obviously decline more than that of rural groups, as they would be most likely to be attacked and consequently the most fearful. It is possible that the peasants, who are in general antagonistic toward the regime, might derive some satisfaction at attacks on the cities to which they are forced to send their grain and which probably appear to them as alien and controlling forces.

11. The decline in Soviet morale resulting from US air attacks might be offset somewhat by various counterbalancing factors. Any extensive Soviet land victories and/or heavy retaliatory air attacks would tend to bolster Soviet morale. Both of these factors would

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be more indirect and less immediate in their effect, however, than the impact of heavy air attacks. Devastation and destruction actually experienced would be more important in developing popular attitudes. Should the Soviet citizen become convinced that he was fighting a patriotic war against the attacker and should US air attacks increase antagonism toward the attacker (see below), Soviet will to fight would also be strengthened.

12. Moreover, unless US air attacks were to disrupt seriously the various mechanisms of Kremlin control, any adverse impact on Soviet popular morale would be unlikely, at least in the earlier stages, to be a major obstacle to Soviet ability to wage war. If Soviet control mechanisms were seriously weakened, however, the Kremlin might be unable to prevent a decline in morale under US air attacks from materially affecting Soviet war potential.

PROBABLE EFFECTS ON SOVIET POPULAR ATTITUDES TOWARD THE US AND THE KREMLIN

13. An important psychological effect of a US air offensive, and part of its over-all impact on Soviet morale, would be its effect on Soviet popular attitudes toward the US and the Kremlin. This would also depend to a great extent upon the attendant circumstances surrounding US attacks, such as the target systems hit, the success of Soviet propaganda in conditioning the popular reaction, and US psychological warfare measures. Moreover, over a period of time, the adverse morale effects of heavy, destructive US bombing would gradually dull any initial Soviet popular reactions toward the US or the regime. As in Germany and Japan, these would become submerged in the general apathy, exhaustion, and preoccupation with personal problems which appear to result eventually from widespread and devastating air attacks. We are unable to predict at what point this condition would be reached, but it would appear to be an eventual result of such air attacks.

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14. Effect on popular attitudes toward the US. US air attacks would probably cause an initial growth of hostility toward the attacker, particularly among bombed groups, but we doubt whether over the longer run they would produce widespread popular hatred of the US. To some extent at least Soviet civilians would tend realistically and even fatalistically to accept US bombing as one of the hazards of war. Moreover, the fairly general lack of strong anti-US sentiment among the people and the difficulty of building up hatred for the US is recognized by the Soviet leaders, as indicated by their extensive postwar propaganda campaign to build up antagonism. The anti-US reaction to air attacks would be much stronger among groups most closely identified with the regime, which might contribute to greater Soviet will to fight. The development of a strong anti-US reaction among the general population, however, would largely depend upon Soviet success in convincing the people that the US was the aggressor, and was launching atrocity and "terror" attacks.

15. Effect on popular attitudes toward the Kremlin. On the other hand, we consider it likely that much of the initial hostility toward the US might be supplanted, to the extent that Soviet defense and countermeasures were unsuccessful, by an increased antagonism toward the regime. German and Japanese experience in the last war indicates that to the extent the government failed to provide adequate protection to the people and attempted to minimize the extent of the damage, it aroused popular resentment. If Soviet propaganda attempted to underplay US air attacks it might well boomerang. The heightened popular emotions created by air attacks, which would have little outlet against the attackers, would probably be expended finally on domestic leaders and fellow citizens, particularly if Soviet defenses were inadequate.

16. We consider it unlikely that US bombing would in itself cause the Soviet people to rally closer to the regime, at least in the long run. The considerable apathy toward the Kremlin which exists among the population and the wide gap already separating the people from their leaders militate against any such development. Only if the population were convinced that the USSR was fighting a patriotic war of

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defense against outside aggression would there probably be any growth in popular support for the regime. On the other hand, various minority groups antagonistic toward the regime might be encouraged by US air attacks as a prelude to possible liberation. Bombing itself, however, would be unlikely to incite them to rebel against the regime, unless Soviet controls broke down.

17. Effect of the use of atomic weapons. While the Kremlin has tried to incite popular antipathy toward atomic "terror" weapons and would probably play this up in event of US atomic attacks, we are unable to say whether use of mass destruction weapons would in itself create antagonism toward the US over the longer run. Any unique reaction to atomic weapons might be more likely to take the form of an increasingly adverse effect on morale. Most Soviet citizens probably realistically accept that a war would be waged with all available weapons. On the other hand, Soviet propaganda would undoubtedly make much of US "atrocities" and use of "terror" weapons and might succeed in capitalizing initially on the popular emotions aroused in particular by "area" attacks on population centers.

18. Effect of choice of targets. The popular reaction would probably be more sharply antagonistic if non-military as well as purely military targets were attacked, particularly with atomic bombs. Soviet propaganda would stress destruction of non-military targets as it did in World War II and the Korean war. Attacks on purely military or key industrial targets would be realistically understood by the people, as in World War II, and would probably have a minimal effect on popular feeling. However, in many cases, particularly where these targets were in cities, and where an area weapon like an atomic bomb was used, it would be difficult for the people to distinguish the object of the attack. To the extent that US propaganda could identify the targets attacked in any particular city, popular antagonism might be less. However, it seems clear that atomic attacks on population centers would at least temporarily arouse antagonism toward the attackers, although we are unable to assess how significant this antagonism might be.

19. There are conflicting opinions as to the probable popular reactions to attacks on cities of symbolic or cultural significance, such as Moscow or Leningrad. Undoubtedly such attacks would create some anti-US sentiment, although many Soviet citizens might understand the significance of attacking the centers of Soviet control. There was a strong local Soviet reaction to German destruction of key churches and national monuments in the last war, particularly when this appeared purely wanton, and Soviet propaganda would undoubtedly stress this theme.

20. Effect of popular belief that US or USSR was the aggressor. We are convinced that the USSR would attempt by every means to pin the label of aggressor on the US. The Soviet regime is already seeking systematically to prepare the population for possible war by an increasing propaganda campaign against the US. To the extent that circumstances surrounding the beginning of a war permitted the Kremlin to convince the people that the US was the aggressor, popular antagonism toward the US and patriotic will-to-fight would probably increase. Under these circumstances the people would probably react more hostilely, at least initially, to US air attacks, depending on the patriotic fervor which the USSR could create. On the other hand, widespread popular belief that the USSR was the aggressor would minimize the effectiveness of Soviet propaganda about US air attacks, might reduce any antagonism against the US, and could also increase resentment toward the regime if it inadequately protected the people from US bombing. Popular scepticism toward official pronouncements would undoubtedly increase, creating greater psychological warfare opportunities for the US. The USSR would also make every propaganda effort to convince the people that the US launched the first atomic blow. If the Soviet public believed that the USSR launched the first attack, however, they would be prone to expect retaliation in kind.

SOVIET PROPAGANDA REACTION TO US AIR ATTACKS

21. The Soviet government would doubtless seek by all available propaganda means to minimize the adverse morale effects of US air attacks and to utilize these attacks to create patriotic anger at the US. Soviet propaganda would probably seek to: (a) whip up popular anger at US "atrocities" and "terror" attacks, while (b) minimizing and concealing the damage caused; and (c) offsetting it by playing up Soviet "relatiatory" attacks, either real or fictional, and victories on land. Judging from its techniques during World War II and during the Korean conflict, Soviet propaganda would devote much attention to alleged US atrocities, brutality, and use of such weapons as the atomic bomb. The actual effectiveness of US attacks would be minimized and the alleged defensive capabilities of the USSR maximized in order to bolster faith in victory and conceal the actual consequences of the US air offensive.

22. Although the effectiveness of Soviet propaganda will depend on numerous intangibles such as the success of Soviet countermeasures, the extent of US attacks, the spread of news by rumor and US propaganda, and popular views as to who is the aggressor, we believe that it would be unable to counteract a decline in over-all morale. The spreading of news through the grapevine would reduce the impact of official censorship and propaganda although it is difficult to tell to what extent. The success of attempts to minimize the damage would be largely dependent upon the extent and nature of the US attacks. Once knowledge of these attacks became widespread, it would be difficult to minimize adverse morale effects. German attempts to hide the effects of bombing from the people boomeranged and caused considerable dissatisfaction. News and rumors apparently spread rapidly in the USSR, where the people tend to be sceptical of official propaganda. The Soviet news blackout on the German advance into the USSR in 1941 was apparently unsuccessful and accurate information spread rapidly by the grapevine. Optimistic official propaganda will be more widely disbelieved if, as in Germany and Japan, it is at variance with personal experience. Rumors and tales by refugees may actually exaggerate the effects of air attacks.

23. However, it must be recognized that because of the all-embracing nature of the Soviet propaganda machine, Soviet propaganda might have significant success in building up antagonism toward the US as a result of US air attacks, particularly if the Soviet people could be convinced the US was the aggressor. The USSR might also be able to capitalize on "indiscriminate" and "terroristic" US attacks. To this extent the Kremlin might at least temporarily be able to offset some of the over-all adverse morale effects of a US air offensive.

EFFECT OF US PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE MEASURES

24. Despite the obvious handicaps under which they would be forced to operate, we believe that skillful US psychological warfare measures, especially prior warnings, might contribute materially to countering Soviet propaganda and reducing the antagonism toward the US resulting from US air attacks. Depending upon the skill and effectiveness with which it was disseminated, US propaganda emphasizing that the US is fighting to free the Soviet people from their terroristic government, and is seeking only to destroy Soviet war potential might to some extent reduce the anti-US reaction to US air attacks. It would be most attractive to various disaffected groups. On the other hand, widespread attacks on population rather than production centers probably would produce scepticism over this propaganda line. Nevertheless, to the extent that US propaganda can get through to the Soviet people with accurate news about the purposes and effectiveness of US air attacks, it would tend to counter Soviet propaganda themes.

25. In particular, prior US warnings might to some extent reduce the popular anti-US reaction to US air attacks. They would also magnify the impression of US air superiority if the attacks were actually and successfully carried out. Emphasis in the warnings on the fact that the US attacks were directed against the regime's war-making potential and not against the people would be beneficial. A warning program could give the US a reputation for humanity and fairness which would tend to minimize popular resentment against the attackers and, if inadequate defense measures were taken, to increase resentment against the regime. As warnings were fulfilled, people would pay more attention to US propaganda, while Soviet propaganda stressing their invincibility and American brutality might be largely discredited.

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26. The effectiveness of warnings would depend on the specific and detailed nature of the instructions and explanations given and on whether the threatened attacks were actually carried out. German warnings to the Soviet population in World War II apparently were successful because of their timing and accuracy. If the Soviet government prevented people from evacuating areas which they were warned would be attacked, it might seriously increase resentment toward the regime.

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